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SUBJECT: REFORMING EATING HABITS IN TAIWAN, AN OPPORTUNITY FOR U.S.
FRESH FRUITS AND VEGETABLES

¶1. Summary. A growing concern for Taiwan health authorities is to ensure its population's increasingly poor eating habits do not spiral out of control. Despite popular perception to the contrary, actual consumption of healthy foods like fruits and vegetables remains relatively low. Recent health surveys have shown that 70% of the Taiwan population eats less than 3 servings of fruits and vegetables a day, while Department of Health (DOH) guidelines encourage five-a-day consumption. The concept of eating healthy is almost a lost message among the vociferous promotion of less healthy and fast food in Taiwan. U.S. agriculture interests have an advantageous opportunity to work with local Taiwan health authorities to promote U.S. fruits and vegetables in a market that is short on healthy eating messages. End summary.

¶2. Taiwan authorities at central, county, and local levels of government have been placing significant emphasis on improving the diet of its population. Behind this policy is a noticeable trend of a growing segment of consumers in Taiwan eating an unbalanced diet. Street-side and fast food restaurants are very popular, catering to the increasing number of consumers that have little time to eat and who function in high-stress work environments. Taiwan families are dining out more often on food that is quick on delivery but short on greens and generous with fat, oils, and starches.

¶3. Poor eating habits start with Taiwan's youngest consumers. A survey of 742 kindergartens across Taiwan revealed that snacks high in sugar, salt and oil content were distributed to children in five out of ten school snack times during the course of the week. A significant number of Taiwan consumers are putting minimal thought on actively consuming fruits and vegetables. A recent study by the Formosa Cancer Foundation concluded that 70% of the Taiwan population consumes less than 3 servings of fruits and vegetables a day. The United States is only slightly better, where 65 percent of the population consume less than three servings a day. However, government, public, and private sector partnerships in the U.S. address the need for healthier eating with a 5-a-Day campaign from the national to the local levels to promote fruits and vegetable consumption.

¶4. Through the efforts of the Formosa Cancer Foundation, Taiwan has been exposed to a similar 5-a-Day program since 1999. The Foundation focuses on the cancer risk-reducing benefits from consuming fruits and vegetables. DOH has also supported dissemination of this message because of the campaign's consistency with general DOH mandates. Taiwan school nutritionists attend DOH-funded training conferences organized by the Cancer Foundation that teach techniques to promote 5-a-Day message to school children.

The method to convey the message, however, is slow to influence national eating habits.

15. The concern of Taiwan authorities over the current downward trend in healthy eating habits is also fueled by concern over the burden an unhealthy population will put on the National Institute of Health (NIH), the nationally-funded system under the DOH that is obligated to provide affordable healthcare to the entire population.

The DOH is accountable for promoting health and wants to reduce the healthcare burden by encouraging consumers to follow national health guidelines. While the DOH Bureau of Food Safety establishes wide-ranging health guidelines at the national level, health messages at the consumer level are coordinated and distributed by multiple health foundations using DOH funding. Leaving DOH's broad consumer guidelines for many private health foundations to decipher and convey to the public results in health messages that seem weak compared to temptations from less healthy alternatives.

DOH eight-point health guidelines include:

- Keep an ideal weight
- Vary foods to maintain a balanced diet*
- Eat 5 different grains during the 3 daily meals
- Consume high-fiber foods*
- Eat less salt, grease, and sugar
- Consume high-calcium foods
- Drink more water
- Reduce liquor consumption

* Includes brief reference to eating fruit and vegetables

16. The population's worrisome eating trend coupled with the DOH's inefficient consumer health promotion program presents a unique opportunity for U.S. agriculture interests to help strengthen Taiwan's weak health promotion program and raise awareness and

TAIPEI 00001523 002 OF 002

demand for U.S. fruits and vegetables. By positioning U.S. fruits and vegetables as a healthy, preferred, and high-quality product, U.S. agriculture interests can offer a mutually-beneficial program designed to promote healthy eating in Taiwan. Taiwan officials and private groups sponsoring a healthy eating message for Taiwan consumers have told AIT that they welcome the involvement of U.S. associations.

17. An active health message featuring U.S. products would provide major benefits to U.S. interests by addressing two issues arising from Taiwan's entrance to the WTO. Committing to a mutually beneficial program with Taiwan DOH will provide a constructive base from which to negotiate future, possibly adversarial, issues AIT is likely to face in ongoing market access and trade policy negotiations. In addition, since its entrance into the WTO, the Taiwan market is increasingly saturated with price-competitive food imports from non-U.S. suppliers, causing U.S. agriculture products to lose market share. An opportunity to increase overall consumption of fruits and vegetables in addition to conveying the value-added message of U.S.-produced products as a healthy and preferred product can positively affect future trade volumes.

18. Currently the AIT Agriculture Section is supporting a proposal requesting USDA funds for a 5-a-Day campaign in Taiwan. This proposal aims to create joint-efforts between the Agriculture Trade Office, Taiwan private health foundations, and Taiwan health authorities in order to promote U.S. fruits and vegetables through a 5-a-Day program. Funding is still pending approval from USDA Foreign Agriculture Service. END COMMENT.

YOUNG